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Miserere, Georges Rouault

La Salle University Art Museum

Miserere

MISERERE

GEORGES ROUAULT

An exhibition of ten selected plates, to commemorate the Easter Season 1976

Graciously lent by the Philadelphia College of Art

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"The chained lion roars toward his desert, the captive eagle retains in his eyes the reflection of the sky where he once soared alone and free; similarly, on this earth of exile, man aspires toward Eternity.

"The more he is man, the more his genius is made of despair and hope, of revolt and acceptance, of pain and joy, of melancholy and serenity, of holy wrath or love. It is a unique, immense cry, a sob or formidable laugh which could absorb and summarize in him the melancholy or the joys of several centuries. Today I have attempted to write down the lamentations or litanies of an artist who, amid deceptive theories and latent anarchy, caught a glimpse of a promised Land where he was able to work with simplicity and love."

This text written by Rouault, published in 1910, is the opening of a tribute to Cézanne. It is not without pertinency here in this exhibition of plates selected from Rouault's Miserere, because this tribute is the verbal expression of a theme which not only strikes the public eye but also links the artist himself with long-standing artistic tradition. Rouault's opus is a blending of the medieval, God-centered epic and the suffering, miserable human comedy of today's world. This fusion renders him a spiritual kinsman to the artists, poets and novelists who have dealt with human sorrow since the time of Dante. As a painter and engraver, Rouault, especially in his early works, examines the depths in a terrestial hell populated with victims of the flesh, of the lust for money, of knowledge and of selfishness. He depicted the corruption of society in configurations of prostitutes, unscrupulous lawyers and judges, smug rich people, and sanctimonious bourgeois. His delineation of the downtrodden and the persecuted interacting with these subjects formed the basis for Rouault's pictorial statement on the wickedness of the world. All this was held up to view and Rouault's art began to reach a prophetic level of visual parable. Ultimately, Rouault's central image of mankind assumed the form of the circus clown.

The artist saw that the clown was himself--all of us. Like the clown, any man, caught unaware in the vicissitudes of this infinitely sad life, would arouse pity in our hearts.

Rouault's social commentary did not make him the artist of utter despair. On the contrary, it served to translate his religious vision into relevant and powerful terms. Therefore, hope is not absent in the works of Rouault. From the time of Miserere, Christ is always present. In this particular collection of prints, whose original title carried the words "mercy" and "war" the Saviour is a mighty opposition and a promise of salvation to the numerous portrayals of despair. In Miserere, Rouault attempts to bestow upon the modern world the pledge of the Passion. Life is not sorrowful resignation alone. Christ, the Man of sorrows and the God of mercy, indicates that we must endure.

Georges Rouault is one of the solitary figures of an era of group manifestoes, a devout Catholic and devotional painter in a period when artists have more often shown indifference and irreverence for subjects religious. Rouault is an artist of sin and redemption despite the domination of "estheticisms" and the academies of his immediate world. In his paintings, graphics and writings he manifests a ferocious vision of moral portent in contrast to the peaceful aspirations of his contemporary, Matisse. Rouault did not anticipate or seek understanding and acceptance. Gustave Moreau foresaw this and Rouault recalls his master's words, "I tremble particularly for those [students] like you, whose most emphatic expression is their personal vision alone. I see you more and more isolated and solitary. You love a grave and sober art, religious in its essence, and everything you do will be marked by that stamp. I hope that the collectors and dealers will be intelligent enough not to ask you for something else." This vision became his life, yet Rouault was capable of extending his consciousness to the suffering of other artists. He calls Degas a "puritan" of art; speaks of Van Gogh as one who is understood only by painters and pilgrims; addresses Cézanne as a painter whose work is marked by a spirituality of so little exhibitionism that it goes unnoticed. He states that Matisse will be berated for purity of line, for the joy and freshness of interplay in his works. In Renoir, often reproached for his appetency to paint for his own pleasure, Rouault finds a gentle, loving heart whose smile concealed suffering and heroism Rouault knew that his turn to be criticized would come, that journalists and others would designate him the "leper" or "the insensible

expressionist of 1900." His strength of vision prevails: "I've heard so much for the past thirty years that I've become a little deaf."

To admire Rouault for his solitary stance alone is to misunderstand him. We have seen that he was in communion with his contemporaries, and that remained constant despite their differences of opinion regarding the pictorial craft. Herein lies the paradox of Rouault. He was not subject to the control of others but his freedom did not represent total detachment and alienation. One must understand that as a young man, at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he felt imprisoned by the traditional education imposed on him. Then, after years of critical attack, one readily understands his curiosity and attraction for "modesty and retirement vis-a-vis the world." Like Degas and Cézanne before him, Rouault "worked" at becoming a solitary artist because it was the only way to remain free. Refusing to enter any school, irritated when art historians tried to label him or place him in artistic movements, he remained a man of independence, even in the domain of controversy. To those artists who claimed that they owed nothing to either God or teacher, Rouault retorted that they were victims of their own revolt. For himself he proclaimed, "I am obedient." Thus he safeguarded his rights as an individual. What was important to him was to be what one is, loyally, sincerely, and naturally. Rouault followed this conception to the limit. Yet in this spirit of absolutism, courage, and generosity which demanded that he pay with his very being, Rouault posed neither as saint, hero, nor intellectual. He stayed in touch with humanity by means of his persistent sense of communion. An excellent example of this is seen in a conversation between Rouault and Degas. The latter, in a moment of despondency, referred to the artistic anarchy of their time, longing for the admirable technique of the old masters, then said to Rouault, "We will have to become slaves again." Rouault replied"...aren't we all slaves in some sense? The rich to their appetites, the poor to their distress, and sensitive artists to the inner voice which chides them when they fall asleep on the promptly wilted laurels of success."

The upheaval that Rouault experienced--revolt, rejection, or isolationism--saved him from academicism and made him a modern artist. His spiritual affinities are with the religious painters of the thirteenth century, but the need to express his religious convictions

necessitated an art of the present day. His spiritual outlook is an indictment of vice and evil, an attempt to rediscover the values of Christianity. It follows that this outlook required and occasioned changes of great consequence in his conception of form. Having broken free from academic tradition, he reverted to the status of a native. This, however, did not prevent him from applying all the skill and knowledge that he had acquired. He then devised a style in which line and contour no longer coincide, in which shadow no longer prevails over light. Rouault achieved an integration of hieratic simplicity and decomposition of forms which has little relationship to realism. This led him to a very personal expression of the trancendental.

He views and paints humanity in the light of the Gospel, conceiving his art as a means of investigation which moves between the real and the imaginary, the objective and the contemplative--in order to apprehend the mystery of the human and of the Supreme. His art is a resource placed in the artist's hands by God in order that he be saved by giving the best of himself, forgetting life. Art, both fatal and voluntary, elaborated on both levels of consciousness, constitutes for him the constantly incomplete approach toward a certain ideal which remains untouched and inaccessible. In this regard he considers himself the brother of Cézanne, an artist whose high ideal was a fugitive reflection, whose life, far removed from deceptive theories, allowed him to recover, at certain times, a corner of the lost Paradise. Similarly Rouault felt that he was the spiritual son of Orpheus, because like all artists, the mythical figure had watched the object of his love vanish from his sight.

The original project for the Miserere was for 100 large etchings to illustrate the text for Miserere et Guerre which was to be written by André Suarès. Two separate volumes seem to have been planned but the project was never completed. The inspiration for the project came from Ambroise Vollard, the well-known art dealer and publisher. According to Rouault, the subjects were first treated in India ink drawings which were afterwards transformed into paintings at Vollard's request. Then they were all transferred to copperplate, which Rouault reworked. Only 58 of the prints were completed and then struck during the years 1922-27; however, the completed volume did not appear until 1947. Rouault worried that the engravings would never be published; but after twenty long years of waiting, he re-

covered them and entrusted their publication to the Etoile Filante, Paris.

The prints for Miserere are perhaps Rouault's greatest accomplishment in the graphic arts and, in addition to their extraordinary technical quality, are remarkable for their power and clarity as icons.

Rouault shows a strong literary sense in the titles he placed on the engravings: some are taken from the Bible, Latin poets or Pascal's Pensées, while others are coinages of his own. A few of the plates reveal the painter's hatred for the monstrosities of war but it is the figure of Christ which dominates the series. For Rouault the force of Jesus is his penury. Rouault proclaimed that Jesus conquered and Jesus conqueror is pre-eminently the brother of humanity--"Only Jesus covered with blood was willing to hear me." Christ's antagonist in the series is Death, a martial presence, implacably waiting and cruelly half victorious.

It is important to remember that as well as being a great painter Rouault was a great draftsman and technician. When he set out to devote his energies to the graphic work of Miserere, Rouault rediscovered a medium most congenial to his talents.

The methods he used in making his black and white etchings are complicated and indirect. The first stage of making the very unconventional etchings consisted in transferring, through photomechanical process, the artist's studies in gouache or other media to copper plates. Once photographed on the copper, the painter's preliminary images were altered and transformed through the use of engraver's tools and chemicals. The photographic base disappeared almost entirely under the extensive hand work. Rouault reported that he went hard at the copper because he wanted to achieve a series of final images of equal quality. Dissatisfied, he would keep on repeating the subject until he had made from ten to fifteen states per plate. This process might well account for the close relationship between Rouault's etchings and paintings. Rouault extended the graphic art to such excellence that it would not be impertinent to describe these engravings with the adjectives "coloristic, painterly, or three-dimensional."

At the end of his preface to Miserere, Raouault had one of his poems printed. It seems most fitting to include it here.

Form, color, harmony
Oasis or mirage
For the eyes, the heart or the spirit

Towards the surging ocean of the call of art
"tomorrow will be beautiful," said the ship-
    wrecked man
Before disappearing beneath the sullen horizon

Peace hardly seems to reign
In this anguished world
Of Shadows and pretences

Jesus on the cross will tell you better than I
And Joan on trial in brief and sublime answers
As well as the obscure or hallowed
Saints and Martyrs